

YOU ARE VIEWING A PREVIEW

Ten Thousand Hours

Ren Benton

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THE BEACHSIDE TERRACE offered a serene space to enjoy breakfast and linger over a book—until the arrival of Tyrannosaurus bride.

“I am getting married today,” she repeated as if anyone in the vicinity had missed the previous twenty announcements to that effect. “I cannot have carbs touching my plate. Take this back to the kitchen and do it correctly!”

The young waiter apologized for his mistake in delivering the French toast with blueberry compote and whipped cream the carb-phobic bride had ordered minutes earlier. The moment the beast released him, he scurried toward the kitchen, too grateful to escape with his life to question the logic of telling the chef to *correctly* prepare a plate largely consisting of flour and sugar using no flour and no sugar.

Ivy took cover behind her book when she heard the predator’s approach and monitored the developing threat with furtive glances around the edge of her paper shield. The smug tilt of the bride’s lips

confirmed she had barely begun playing with her food. She emitted a piercing laugh in response to a member of her entourage and resumed swilling her fourth mimosa.

Judging by the size of the glass, Ivy calculated each drink must contain twenty-four grams of sugar, but carbs in a glass were obvious exemptions on the Wedding Day Diet. After all, how would anyone recognize the special nature of the day if the participants weren't shitfaced by midmorning?

So much for running away from home to escape all things bridal. If the hotel's website had mentioned their mission of grinding newlyweds out of a nuptial mill, Ivy would have stayed home with the blinds drawn and let her calls go to voicemail instead.

She should have searched for a destination that prohibited weddings. Surely such places existed. If not, her tourism demographic was woefully underserved and ripe for exploitation. She would have found a way to pay extra for two entire days free of any exposure to marriage, even if she had to sell a kidney to finance the dream.

"There you are." Camille sank into the chair across the table from her. She had run away from home to escape the grueling chore of being a goddess, with a similar lack of success. In just one day, she had

absorbed the sun like a radiance sponge, giving her skin a burnished-copper luster. On an ordinary day, she drew stares. Here, people asked for her autograph because only celebrities glowed the way Camille did—and she was delighted to give it to them along with thanks to her fans, without whom her success as a florist wouldn't be possible.

She tucked the loose end of the scarf protecting her tight curls from the ravages of the wind. “I spotted your hair from the other side of the hotel.”

The surf-scented breeze tossed the ends of Ivy's upswept hair into her eyes. The same bottle of wine that spurred her to book this trip also convinced her it was time to experience life as a redhead. One box of dye later, her naturally nondescript brown locks rivaled the color of the merlot. Her hair continued to bleed when wet. Today, she wore it tied in a scarlet plume high on her head to protect her white peasant blouse from stains. “You should hail me from a safe distance to make sure you're not being led to your doom by an escapee from clown prison.”

“You look good with some color on you for a change. You won't admit it because you'd rather be invisible, god knows why.”

Before Ivy could explain invisibility was a state of being more than a preference, the voice of the beast

rose once more. “The wind is messing up my hair. Do something!”

One of the bride’s companions suggested, “We could go inside the restaurant, Courtney.”

“I want the fresh air!” A fist pounded the table to emphasize each word.

Camille’s head swivelled to behold the commotion. “What. The. Hell.”

“She’s getting married today,” Ivy explained as the bride-to-be did likewise at the top of her lungs.

“Jesus save the poor man who gets stuck with that.”

“I’m sure her soulmate finds her forthright demeanor enchanting.” They would live happily ever after, as long as he could meet such demands as shutting down the prevailing winds to preserve his beloved’s hair on special occasions.

Ivy’s dilemma raised a spectral hand to get her attention. *So you admit low expectations are the key to long-term relationship satisfaction.*

Her dilemma had a penchant for straw men, this time standing up low expectations as the opposite of impossible ones to make the former sound reasonable.

Ivy wasn’t falling for it. Expecting little might limit disappointment, but there was nothing *satisfying* about aiming low.

She and her dilemma had brandished the same points repeatedly during the past three days. The stalemate would continue until a new weapon came into play with the might to slay either the sensible choice or her desire for more.

Never one to pass up free entertainment, Camille openly watched the other table. “In your expert opinion, how long will that marriage last?”

Ivy had seen twenty brides a week for the past five years. It was her job to find the perfect representation of the bride’s personality, theme, budget—and, in one case, aura—in dress form. Most of her brides never passed through her dressing room again, but she saw enough repeat customers to identify certain patterns. “She hasn’t mentioned the groom once, so he’s a nonentity in her equation. He might cower in the background for years before she leaves him for not being man enough to take charge.”

“She doesn’t look like she’d put a dick in her mouth to make it worth his while, either.”

The mimosa pitcher slipped from booze-clumsy fingers and shattered on the tile floor, followed by a shriek that made Ivy shift her book for protection lest her water glass explode in sympathy. “Wouldn’t want to muffle that dulcet voice.”

“Who wouldn’t? The maid of honor looks like she

wants to stab her in the larynx with a shard of glass.”

“You’re projecting.” Another glance over her book caught at least three members of the entourage looking wild-eyed enough to risk jail time. “Or not.”

“Ooh, a bridal breakfast. What fun!” Jen joined them at the table. She had run away from home with them to soak in the tub and nap without interruptions by her husband and three kids, and she’d had the most success of the three of them. She lifted the hand that wasn’t holding a muffin the size of a softball and waved at the other table.

Ivy sank lower in her chair. How had someone accustomed to invisibility acquired two best friends who lived in spotlights?

In the time it took Jen to introduce herself, strangers felt she’d been a friend for years. She exuded happiness toward everyone, even people she’d never met, and without exception, people reflected that welcome right back. Even while trapped in the vortex of an epic tantrum, every nonbride at the other table smiled and waved to her.

Jen dropped into the vacant chair beside Ivy and peeled the wrapper from her muffin. “Doesn’t that make you want to be a bride, Ivy?”

Camille turned her chair a few degrees to get the full benefit of the morning sun on her face. “Yes, she’s

been waiting all her life for the opportunity to be a complete bitch to everyone she knows.”

Jen leapt to the cranky stranger’s defense. “It’s normal to be a little emotional. The wedding day is the most stressful day in a woman’s life.”

Ivy added another dagger to her arsenal to wield against her dilemma. She had enough stressful days without signing up for one guaranteed to top them all.

Women showed signs of that stress even a year before the big day when they came to her looking for their gowns. Scripting, staging, costuming, promoting, and catering a spectacle for an audience of dozens, sometimes hundreds, was an undertaking on par with producing a Broadway musical but without even the slim possibility of return on the investment. Of course it was stressful—and utterly avoidable. Ivy had no sympathy to spare for anyone who volunteered to put on the show to amaze friends and family and then used the performance as an excuse to punish everyone around her for their proximity.

Jen nibbled the edge of her muffin. “Someone order. I feel like a pig eating by myself.”

“I collared the waiter on my way in,” Camille assured her. “The mountain of bacon, eggs, hash browns, and waffles I ordered will make you feel righteously self-disciplined.”

Ivy's breakfast had been far more disciplined than either of theirs, and she felt only envy. One poached egg, plain oatmeal, and a cup of blueberries hadn't made her mouth water the way Camille's order did, but she had the calories, fat, protein, sugar, and fiber content memorized for ease of notation in her food journal. "I ate earlier."

"I bet it was oatmeal." Camille's head fell back when Ivy didn't deny the allegation. "You do know you're on vacation, right?"

After three years of monitoring the nutritional value of every crumb that went into her mouth, Ivy had reached the midrange of medically normal weight for her height. Theoretically, she could eat hot fudge sundaes for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for two days without swerving into *overweight* territory. Realistically, however, she had too many clothes that wouldn't zip if she brought home five extra pounds of ass as a souvenir, and—particularly after this trip—there was no room in her budget for emergency fat pants.

"I don't think she does. She went to the gym at five this morning." Jen picked a chocolate chunk out of her muffin and popped it into her mouth. "Why does a hotel even have a gym? Who comes to a tropical paradise to sweat on a different treadmill? I

mean, other than Ivy.”

The gym had been otherwise unoccupied, but Ivy attributed her solitude to the hour, no different from a gym at home. The people with beautiful bodies to maintain wouldn’t show up until they had company to appreciate the taut, toned fruits of their exertion, displayed in teeny shorts and midriff-baring tank tops.

People with bodies like Ivy’s worked out in thigh-covering T-shirts and did their ungainly lumbering while everyone else was asleep.

Her diet and exercise habits might not have a vacation mode, but she wasn’t behaving *exactly* as she would at home. “I didn’t answer that call from Holly during dinner last night.”

“And we were so proud of you,” Camille praised in a tone appropriate for a successful potty training session, “until two minutes later, when you developed a sudden, overwhelming urge to pee and ran off to check your voicemail.”

Ivy turned to the next page without reading the one in front of her. “It might have been an emergency.”

Jen’s lips puckered for an instant before smoothing out. “So what did she have to say?”

Nothing about an emergency.

“The same thing she says every time,” Camille answered when Ivy didn’t. “Aunt Ivy has to take the

kids so Mommy can go out partying.”

Jen accepted that response as accurate—which it was. “Does she know you’re two thousand miles from home?”

Ivy called her sister from the airport to advise her not to drop the kids at the curb and speed away because no one would be home to watch them for a couple of days. Her boarding call cut short Holly’s apoplectic fit, but not before Ivy got an earful about how selfish she was for ruining Holly’s plans for the weekend by leaving her without free babysitting and also for not inviting her—in which case her ruined plans and childcare needs apparently wouldn’t have been cause for upset.

The bride across the terrace, sensing her routine wearing thin with her audience, switched tactics. Her voice rose in a wail. “If you loved me, you would support me!”

The scene was an amateur rendition of Holly’s recorded performance the night before. *You’re never there for me. You don’t know the meaning of family. This is how you repay me for all the times I protected you? I guess there’s no one in this world I can count on anymore.*

Jen turned her muffin to the unnibbled side. “If you hadn’t left the Bag of Infinite Holding in the

room, I would have thought you got an early flight so Holly could have at least half a weekend.”

Ivy’s shoulder bag typically held everything necessary to be prepared for work, kid wrangling, hair and makeup repairs, changes in weather conditions, and minor injuries, for starters. Everyone made fun of her survival kit—until they lost a filling and needed some dental cement, and then she was a superhero. She never left home, even a temporary one, without it. At the moment, it held all the necessities to survive a weekend away from home, minus the smaller tote currently underfoot, which held only the necessities to survive a couple of hours in town.

Camille adjusted the split in her skirt so the sun could worship her legs. “She’ll be sorry she didn’t come when called.”

There were always consequences for denying Holly, but Ivy could better afford those than the penalty for changing the terms of their discount travel package. “I couldn’t leave. I have a previous engagement keeping you two from strangling each other.”

Jen brightened at the opening. “Speaking of engagements.”

“Ugh. No.” Camille masked her eyes with the fingers of one hand.

“That’s why she’s here. To make the most important decision of her life.”

“I wasn’t saying no to talking about it. I was reiterating my vote on the issue: Ugh. No.”

“Jared is perfect for her.”

“If he was so perfect for her, she wouldn’t have dumped him three years ago.”

Dumped made the split sound dramatic. Ivy and Jared cordially agreed to part ways. No tears were shed. No hearts were broken. The end of the relationship was as quiet and civilized as the rest of it.

They saw each other occasionally because they shared a friendship with Jen and her husband Roger. Those encounters were courteous and unemotional. On the latest occasion, several months ago, Ivy joked it felt just like when they were together. Jared laughed and concurred.

And then he showed up at her door Thursday evening and suggested they get married.

“The important thing is that he’s realized his mistakes and wants her back, permanently this time.”

Ivy raised her book higher and let their debate wage without her input until the battle resulted in one of them raising a point she hadn’t already considered.

“His mistake was being boring, and inflicting that on her permanently is cruel and unusual punishment.”

“Ivy doesn’t mind. She’s boring, too.”

Ivy lowered the corner of her book so the glare she aimed at Jen wouldn’t burn a hole through the pages she hadn’t read yet.

Jen parried the attack. “You’re on vacation, hitting the treadmill before dawn, eating sensibly, wearing SPF 50, and reading a book you’ve already read often enough to recite from memory. Show me where the thrill is.”

Camille, usually quick to argue with Jen on principle, left Ivy to fend for herself.

“Okay, I’m boring, but you could be more tactful about it.”

“Fine. You’re sensible. Better?”

Sensible was worse than boring. Sensible was *choosing* to be boring.

If she weren’t so sensible, she’d fling the contents of her glass in Jen’s face to avenge the insult.

“The sensible thing to do is accept when a decent man comes through with a marriage proposal. You’re not getting any younger, and it’s not like the offers get more frequent when a woman starts to wrinkle and sag.”

After losing sixty pounds, sagging was already an issue—one that developed subsequently to the last time any man saw her naked. Dread at the prospect of

apologizing to a new lover for her deflated body had a lot to do with her lack of nudity.

All that diet and exercise, and she'd been less self-conscious while fat.

There was an additional point in favor of marriage: no more fear of sexual rejection. Jared wanted a sensible wife, not one with a hot body, so she need never worry about disappointing him in that regard.

"So hurry up and lock down that bore you didn't want three years ago." Camille's smile for the young waiter who came bearing tribute made him blush and back away, dazed, after laying the feast before her. She took the adoration as her due and twirled a strip of bacon like her scepter. "You'd think the bore would appreciate how much you hate surprises. Did he say what prompted his sudden interest in matrimony?"

His rationale was very... sensible. Ivy would rather keep the whole truth to herself than volunteer what Jen would consider unassailable logic in his favor. "Basically, neither of us is getting any younger, and it's not like the offers will get more frequent as we wrinkle and sag."

"Romantic," Camille opined around a mouthful of fried potatoes.

"Marriage isn't about romance." Jen injected the last word with scorn.

“Mine is. I got it in writing. If I wanted a damn roommate, I’d have put up a flyer at church.”

Jen gave up on converting Camille to her side and appealed to Ivy exclusively. “Jared is a decent man.”

“You keep using that word.” Camille refused to be excluded. “Von is as decent as they come, but he manages to do it with spice, whereas Jared has the kick of a bowl of plain oatmeal. I forbid Ivy to submit to a lifetime eating nothing but plain oatmeal when she hasn’t even tasted an enchilada.”

Jen picked at her muffin. “The last time I had an enchilada, it gave me diarrhea.”

While Camille wheezed with laughter, Jen reached over to squeeze Ivy’s forearm. “Think of the children.”

Ivy’s insides shriveled. That was the cannon sitting in the background during her little slapfight with her dilemma, waiting for someone to light the fuse.

Camille’s laugh dried up. “Which children?”

“You know which. God forbid, if something happens to Holly, Ivy’s going to inherit those four kids. She needs a *dependable*”—Jen emphasized the word to prove she knew one other than *decent*—“man to help her raise them.”

Camille leaned forward, eyes deadly. “She’s already languishing in the burbs with a mortgage and a minivan like a prematurely middle-aged soccer mom

because her sister drops her litter on her doorstep twenty days out of every month. Those kids go to the best public schools in the county because they passed criteria for *living* with Ivy. She has given enough without yoking herself to a prematurely middle-aged soccer dad on behalf of someone else's children. Right, Ivy?"

Her nieces and nephews could not be left out of the decision. They had a shortage of reliable men in their lives, and Jared was as reliable as he was decent and dependable. Ivy's income was adequate—with strict budgeting—to provide for them to the extent she did, but she worked on commission, and her paychecks waxed and waned in too precarious a fashion to support four kids full time.

They would only get more expensive as they got older.

A second income, particularly the substantial, stable one of a regional bank manager, had been one of the earliest entries in the pro-marriage column.

She would be ashamed of herself for thinking in such mercenary terms if Jared hadn't introduced the topic as a motivating factor during his proposal. In fact, he'd placed so much emphasis on the benefits to the children if she did what he wanted, she couldn't help but note some resemblance to Holly.

He hit her in the guilt center—think of the children—but had nothing to say to her as a woman. He hadn't gone down on one knee because they were equals. He hadn't offered her a ring because if she insisted on a trinket between saying *yes* and *I do*, she ought to choose it herself and get one she liked.

And no doubt pay for it, too. It would be, after all, a whim of hers, not a mutually beneficial purchase warranting joint investment.

She had promised him an answer when she returned home, but Camille wanted one sooner. Ivy couldn't provide it. "I don't know what I'm going to do yet."

"We're leaving tomorrow," Jen prodded, as if a reminder of the time pressure would clarify the issue on the spot.

Ivy had twenty-some hours to make the correct decision—and to come to terms with that decision if it didn't take her happiness into consideration.

She shoved her book into her bag and stood, sending the hem of her skirt swishing across the top of her sandals. "Then I should spend the rest of the day soul searching."

Camille swirled a hunk of waffle in a puddle of syrup. "If you find oatmeal in your soul, keep searching."

Jen gazed up at Ivy with soft, hopeful eyes. “I know you’ll do the right thing.”

Ivy fingered the neckline of her blouse to confirm its position well below her collarbone. The eyelet ruffle hadn’t crept upward, so it must have been the sense of inevitability tightening around her neck like a noose.

END OF PREVIEW